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ABSTRACT

The paper reviews issues in the diagnosis and treatment of language disorders in black exceptional children. The controversy over language characteristics of the urban black child is examined, followed by a review of studies citing the linguistic and cultural bias of many tests used for diagnosis. Difficulties with the use of the System of Multicultural Pluralistic Assessment (SOMPA) are noted along with problems in the use of adaptive behavior scales. The role of motivation in teaching English to black students is considered. The paper concludes by advocating assessment practices that are sensitive to cultural patterns and the use of a variety of assessment instruments to measure language development. (CL)

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Language Problems of Black Exceptional Children: Diagnosis and Treatment Alternatives

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Significant concerns have recently been articulated in regards to diagnosis and treatment of language disorders in black exceptional children (Jones, 1977; Kendall, 1981; Mercer, 1973). The fundamental issue in the diagnosis of black exceptional children spring from the persistent and undeniable fact that there exists a difference between black group test scores and white Anglo-Saxon test scores (Samuda, 1976). Black children repeatedly fall at one standard deviation below the mean score of whites, especially on tests which purpose to measure levels of intellectual functioning.

The importance of language development to the success of any student in public schools cannot be overstated (Kendall, 1982). Particularly, it is believed that language programs for black exceptional children should be developed as thoroughly as language programs for all students. The purpose of this paper is to review diagnostic and treatment alternatives of language problems of black exceptional children.

Controversy Concerning Language Characteristics

Bryen (1974) reports that during the past two decades researchers and educators have witnessed a controversy concerning the Language characteristics of the urban Black Child.

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This controversy is of special significance because of recent charges against the possible linguistic and cultural biases of traditional assessment devices being used in the schools. This debate has led to two arenas of thought. One position maintains that many Black children are linguistically deficient as a result of social or genetic pathology. The second position, supported primarily by linguists and anthropologists, suggest that such children speak a well formed, highly developed language system that is different from standard English.

Bereiter (1965) reported that by the time the Black child is five years old, he is typically one or two years retarded in language development. The crucial question at this point is, if the child is delayed by one to two years upon entering school, is it possible through effective teaching methods for that language delay to be resolved? A large number of researchers (e.g., Clark & Richards, 1966; Deutsch, 1964; Nash, 1979; Osser, Wang, & Zaid, 1969; Peisach, 1965) have offered additional evidence of language deficiency in black children, by usage of the Wepman Auditory Discrimination Test and the Illinois Test of Psycholinguistic Abilities, sentence repetition and closure procedures. Their results showed that Black children were language deficient with respect to phonology, comprehension, and syntax.

In reference to the "difference hypothesis", many people (e.g., Dillard, 1970; Steward, 1967) argue the existence of a distinct language system spoken by a large number of blacks in the United States, which is a direct product of language contact

between African and English languages, which has phonological, morphological, and syntactic similarities and differences with standard English. The growing awareness of existence of a distinct language system spoken by a large number of blacks has encouraged a series of studies designed to analyze and describe Black English (Baratz, 1969; Dillard, 1964, 1967; Fasold, 1969; Wolfram, 1970). There is a general agreement among linguists that these differences in dialects affect superficial features (e.g., the s-marked verb in he goes, versus the unmarked one in he go) rather than the deep structure which invariably affects meaning. There is considerable agreement and description of the linguistic features that are found to be characteristic of Black English (Baratz, 1968; Bryan, 1973; Fasold & Wolfram, 1970; Labov, 1969; Labov & Cohen, 1967; Politzer & Bartley, 1969).

Inadequacy of Tests

A large body of research (e.g., Hickney, 1972; Waddell & Cahoon, 1970) has shown that many tests which are presently used for diagnosis are both linguistically and culturally biased. Roberts (1970) examined the Illinois Test of Psycholinguistic Abilities (ITPA), the Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test (PPVT), the Metropolitan Readiness Test, and the Wechsler Pre-school Primary Scale of Intelligence in order to identify specific knowledge of the test presupposed on the part of the child and the difficulties a speaker of Black English might have in taking these tests. In describing Robert's finding, Baratz (1973) concluded that all the referred to tests discriminated against

dialect speakers in that the items were middle class specific, the items were presented in language that was not familiar to dialect speakers, or the verbal style required for the response was biased against Black dialect speakers..

Language and intelligence appear to share a positive relationship. Thus, when assessing language defficiency, one should also assess intellectual functioning. However, numerous arguments against the use of standard intelligence tests with black children have appeared (Anastasi, 1967; Berdie, 1965; Clark, 1967, Eels, Davis, Havighurst, Herrick, & Tyler, 1951; Halpern, 1971; Johnson & Medinnus, 1965; Kagan, 1968, 1971; Leland, 1971; Levine, 1966; Masland, Sarason & Gladwin, 1958; Mundy & Maxwell, 1958; Palmer, 1970; Reissman, 1962; Sarason & Doris, 1969; Schmideberg, 1970; Schubert, 1967; Williams, 1970a, 1970b, 1970c, 1971; Zigler & Butterfield, 1968). Standard intelligence tests are said to have a strong white, Anglo-Saxon, middle class bias, and that black children are handicapped in taking tests because of deficiencies in motivation, test practice, and reading. In addition, rapport problems are postulated, especially when the examinee is black and the examiner is white. Intelligence tests, too, are said to be more related to nonschool problem-solving experiences of middle class children than to those of lower class children (Masland, et al., 1958; Sarason & Doris, 1969).

The most common strategy employed by test developers to eliminate test bias, has been an effort to minimize the cultural and verbal components of testing. Examples of such efforts include the Davis-Eells Games (Davis & Eells, 1953), the Culture

Free Intelligence Test (Cattell, 1950), and Raven's Coloured Progressive Matrices (Raven, 1962). Despite efforts to desocialize assessment instruments, research consistently suggests that children from low income or minority group backgrounds score lower than White, middle class children on these tests (Costello & Dickie, 1970; Drake, 1959; Higgins & Sivers, 1958; Kidd, 1962; Marquart & Bailey, 1955; Tate, 1952). While only 13.6% of the American population is living in a state of poverty, 34.6% of the 13.6% are Black Americans. This failure to equalize performance patterns has been attributed to differences in cognitive style Cohen (1969), bias in society at large (Ornstein, 1976), and unrealistic expectations for instruments that sample a limited range of school related skills (Ebel, 1972).

Diagnostic Strategies

A rising tide of protests from the Black community and other cultural groups over the disproportionate assignment of children from non-European cultural backgrounds to special education programs designed for subnormal children has encouraged the development of a system of Multicultural Pluralistic Assessment (Mercer, 1973).

However, there are several identifiable problems with the use of the Sompa:

1. One difficulty with this test is accounting for the extremely heterogenous nature of any one culture or ethnic group.
2. Another difficulty is the predictive validity for success in the majority culture.

3. An additional problem is that the Sompa ties into Intelligence Scales.

Adaptive behavior scales attempt to measure the ability of an individual to cope with the natural and social demands of the environment (Grossman, 1973), and thus, should provide a more meaningful index of the individual's needs for special services than does the use of intelligence tests alone. There is a need for several issues to be resolved before the utility of adaptive behavior scales can be fully determined. First, there needs to be a consensus among professionals as to what comprises the adaptive behavior construct. Parents and teachers differ in the ways in which they perceive behavior. This is one of the serious problems with behavior scales. The second issue concern the instrumentation of adaptive behavior scales. Most of the scales depend on parent interviews or teacher reports for the collection of information. Thus, the reliability of the procedure is questionable. The final issue concerns problems in misclassification of black children.

Specific Strategies

Since many black children utilize a language system that is different from standard English, it can be expected that such children will experience more phonological problems than usual. If a child is unable to distinguish the difference in words, he may misunderstand the meaning, misarticulate, or misspell the words. Thus, a large number of black children have decoding problems, which can be reflected in writing, speaking, and reading.

If Black children are to become proficient in the use of the English language, they must first be taught. To be taught requires the presentation of information in a manner that will encourage children to remember what was presented. Motivation of such children is essential, which is an important parameter of memory, and prerequisite to learning.

The use of materials such as Distar Language (Englemann, Osborn & Englemann, 1969), which incorporate practice of the syntactical patterns of Standard English has been found useful with black exceptional children. Utilizing self-correction and teaching-correction procedures, the child learns to spontaneously produce the syntactical patterns being taught. Several additional concerns are unique to the assessment of black exceptional children:

1. Although most Intelligence tests rely heavily on language, normally no attempt is made to determine the black child's level of proficiency in the language or dialect in which the test was administered.
2. Although English is used in intelligence tests and Blacks speak English natively, the results have been largely negative because the dialect used in the testing is not compatible with that spoken by Black children.
3. Black children speak a language that is different from standard English, however, we must be alert that if a person is to be successful in a society which uses standard English, all people living in that society must be fluent in standard English.

Summary

Tests are constructed to discriminate among individuals. If everyone scored within the identical range, the test would be useless for any purpose. Tests, however, should discriminate only along the variables they were designed to measure (e.g., intelligence, achievement), and not along other measures such as cultural backsground, sex, or value systems.

Assessment and treatment alternatives for black exceptional children requires no unusual special education. What is required is that valid professional practice be provided. That means that black children have the right to expect that:

1. Assessment practices be sensitive to cultural patterns which are prevalent among diverse cultural groups, and
2. A variety of assessment instruments (including criterion referenced assessment) be utilized to assess language development before final recommendations are made concerning placement, programming, or curriculum practices.

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